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PARENT-COUNSELOR CONTACTS IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING--INCIDENTAL OR INCREMENTAL.

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UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS TODAY ARE MOVING TOWARD INCREASED AUTONOMY. THE UNIVERSITIES ARE RESPONDING BY BECOMING LESS PARENTAL, ALTHOUGH NOT AS FAST AS STUDENTS WOULD LIKE. DESPITE THEIR EMANCIPATION FROM PARENTS AND PARENT-LIKE AUTHORITY, STUDENTS STILL TEND TO SEE THE COUNSELOR AS A PARENTAL FIGURE. THE COUNSELOR MUST THEREFORE HELP THE STUDENT RESOLVE HIS DEPENDENCY CONFLICT WITHOUT REJECTING HIS PARENTS OR FOSTERING OVERDEPENDENCY. PARENT-COUNSELOR CONTACT IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING IS INCIDENTAL TO THE RESOLUTION OF THE STUDENT'S DEPENDENCY-INDEPENDENCY DIFFICULTIES. LITTLE RESEARCH HAS BEEN DONE IN THIS AREA ALTHOUGH SOME DATA INDICATE THAT THE QUALITY OF THE PARENT-CHILD RELATION IS SEEN IN THE CHILD'S LATER BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES. (WR)

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STUDENT COUNSELING SERVICE

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PARENT-COUNSELOR CONTACTS IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING: INCIDENTAL OR INCREMENTAL

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I am sure that this paper will take a somewhat different tack than the others in this symposium. It will be almost exclusively theoretical and philosophical, rather than relying upon real life experience or upon a feeling that parent-counselor contact in a university setting is an unmitigated good which should be pursued. Part of this non-practical slant stems from a strong feeling that some of the theoreticians and philosophers have something important to say to us in this general area, and part because counselor-parent contact in a university setting is typically a very uncommon occurrence.

While we know that the characteristics of university students differ greatly from campus to campus, one of the major common denominators which cuts across most American campuses i s that the students typically are living away from home for the first extended period in their life and are tentatively nibbling for the first time the rather bitter fruits of independence from parental control. This is even more true today than it was even ten years ago or when most of us were undergraduates and, for those of us who have limited access to contemporary student life, this movement seems to be rather a puzzling one. Students seem to want more freedom, even to demand it. Many of them are significantly cutting their ties to the last generation and are doing so in dramatic, and sometimes alarming ways. The wave of student protests which have covered the country, while on the surface seeming to be caused by often realistic concerns over civil rights, the Viet-Nam war, and spurred on by the new wave of campus Gods, the existentialists, are also a reflection of the student's concerns over what they see as being phony in our society and this phoniness is often exemplified by their perceptions of

their parents. It is significant that many of the students say they cannot trust anyone over thirty (which, of course, is, hopefully, a gross over-statement)--all their parents are in this excluded age range. Like Mario Savio, they express a need to throw themselves into the machine and grind it to a halt, and they realize that this machine was conceived, designed, and manufactured by their parent's generation. The new student-body president at Iowa State, heretofore a large conservative mid-western land-grant institution, typically wears a beard, an inside-out sweat-shirt, and sandles; he has promised to drag Iowa State screaming and yelling (if need be) into the 20th century and, on the basis of this platform and the apparent wide-spread dissatisfaction with the university administration and with the emasculated student government, he obtained the largest number of votes and the largest percentage of votes ever cast in a student election. Now, it is easy for us (and parents and legislators) to discredit this fellow as being young, immature, a beatnik, a radical (as he is a member of the Students for a Democratic Society), and, more damning yet for central Iowa, as being from California or New York. There is only a little truth to these accusations as this particular individual is carrying an A-/B+ average in one of our most difficult curricula, is articulate and obviously bright and hails from a small Iowa town which touts itself as being "the golden buckle of the corn belt". He represents a significant movement in the direction towards increased undergraduate autonomy. The students in most places are moving faster than university administrations would like to see them move. However, the old academic philosophy of in loco parentis has been crumbling for a number of years. The universities are feeling less of a parental obligation to their students than they haveearlier. The changes are reflected often in liberalization of housing and hour policies for undergraduate men and women and at least less overt control over extra-academic student activities. These move-

ments are not coming as rapidly as the students, or many of them, would like, but they are coming. The university is becoming less of a parent and more of a landlord or mentor.

There is quite a paradox in this situation for the person who does counseling or psychotherapy with students, however. While the students are becoming almost arbitrarily more emancipated from their parents and from parental-like authority, they still tend to see the counselor as a parental figure; in fact many of them seek the counselor out implicitly for that reason. The parent is almost always psychologically present in the counseling situation even though psysically he is almost never there. The theoretical verities seem still to hold whether you call this parental intrusion parataxic distortion as Henry Stack Sullivan would, transference, a la Freud, or whatever rubric one might want to use. In fact, the parent may be more present psychologically in the counseling today than ever before because the students often do not have the leisurely pace towards the resolution of the dependence-independence conflicts which they had earlier. The break has been too abrupt and has left too much "unfinished business", too much unresolved. So we have a pseudo-emancipation on an overt level and a great deal of underlying dependency problems.

So much of our work as university counselors has to do with understanding, and dealing with these distortions which our clients effect to make us like the parent whom he left behind only geographically. The client has to be helped, through us, to cut the cord without completely rejecting his parents or his family. As Kell and Mueller in their recent book, Impact and Change in Psychotherapy, have written,

> We see a parallel between (the client's) efforts to change the counselor and continuing persistent efforts to change parents. That is, the clients attempts to change his counselor, we would, feel,

> represent a displaced form of earlier and even continuing attempts to modify the relationship between the client and his parents. The client wishes to maintain the myth that without internal change he eventually will become potent enough to cause his parents to behave differently towards him.

These attempts lead to a difficult position on the part of the counselor who at one level is hopefully a rather nurturant, giving person and yet realistically cannot afford to tolerate over-dependency for fear of just reinstituting the client's strong needs not to be on his own. As Snyder, in his book Dependency in Psychotherapy has put it

> ....the therapist is assuming in this situation a role much like that of a parent (so) he must be careful to avoid repeating the errors that the real parent has made in producing the excessive dependency of the client...when the client finds "leaning on the therapist" too comfortable, the therapist will need to push him to make some efforts of his own. The therapist must re-condition this dependency into a striving to do things for himself.

The other end of the counselor's position is to work through gradually, again without fostering over-dependency, the clients feelings towards his parents so as not to make for the client's complete rejection of the parent. If this complete rejection happens it usually is an extremely brittle solution for a problem and, at least in our Protestant-ethic culture, it often later leads to the client's being over-whelmed by guilt or by adopting a life-style in which poorly controlled hostility towards authority figures plays too major a role.

Now, what about actual contact of the parents with the university counselor? I am not about to categorically say that a parent's seeking out their son or daughter's counselor is always inappropriate, but I will say that it usually is. Often these contacts, overtly motivated by concern or anxiety over their child's well being, are a manifestation of the parents' attempting to maintain the student's filial dependency upon them and/or a fear of what might come out of the counseling. The parent's own psychological needs may

have been bouyed up through the years by the child's dependency and once the child physically leaves the home these needs become unsatisfied which leads the parent to intrude upon the child's independence, not only, as I have said, to reinstitute the dependency but to make sure that the child doesn't reject him completely. Indirectly, many parents denigrate the counseling and often the counselors hear students saying that their parents do not like the fact that their child is in counseling ("why can't you bring your troubles to me"); another curious, but not dissimilar phenomena is that many parents will, when they find their child is in counseling or therapy, go into therapy themselves. This can be quite a healthy thing but sometimes it is more an unhealthy identification and seems to say, "if you do it, I'll do it and then we still will be close". Some parent-counselor contact, however, does seem to be appropriate. One instance, is when a student is so seriously disturbed that realistic plans have to be made for some kind of extra-campus care such as institutionalization, hospitalization, or a return home and referral to a local psychiatrist or psychologist. Anecdotally, it is interesting that many students when this type of contact is suggested, say that their parents will never go along with it, but when the contact is actually made, the parents make very appropriate contributions and plans for the student's well-being. This points out the distortions with which many students view their parents. They see their parents as being much more aloof, or demanding, or smothering than they actually are. This is not meant to down-grade the students' perceptions since, distorted as they are, they are their phenomenological reality and do have to be dealt with. After dealing with a student over an extended period of time, it is often surprising that when the counselor actually does see the parent he sees something quite different from what he expected. He has from the client been lead to expect a father about eight

feet tall, broad-shouldered with a booming voice and, at least psychologically, carrying a whip. When the father appears he often looks and acts like Casper Milquetoast, meek and mild with his Rotary pin firmly planted in his lapel. As I said, however, the disparity between what the student feels and what the counselor sees does not mean that the student is consciously distorting, lying, or something else. What the client feels is his reality and must be dealt with. However, many such contacts with parents of the type outlined above is enough to make a phenomenologist out of almost any counselor.

Is there any research in this area? Unfortunately, there is almost none. Most of what has been done has been done with a younger population where the child is physically in the home. Filial therapy, as reported by Guernsey, is involved in the training of parents to conduct play sessions with their own disturbed children in the home situation. Similarly, Natalie Fuchs has described play therapy in the home. However, with the university student being generally away from home and with his realistic press for independence, these techniques are inappropriate and even physically not possible. We do know some of the effects of the parent-student relationship upon the student's self image and his performance at the university. Obviously, a healthy relationship between the student and his parents enhances the student's self-esteem; this has been empirically established by several persons (for example, by Hollenbeck in a recent Journal of Counseling article entitled "conditions and outcomes in the student-parent relationship"). The dominant contributing factors to a student's adequate self-esteem seem to be that he feels that his parents have a high regard for him and that the parents are open and free to experience new situations and their own feelings--that is that the parents respect and like their child and are perceived by him as being genuine persons. We also know that academic success for a student is positively related to his father's having strong positive feelings for him (or, at least, being perceived by the student as having these feelings)--the mother's positive feelings,

however, have no demonstrated relationship to academic success in a university setting. I think that this differential sex relationship related to our society's differential sex role, that is, that achievement for men is more tied to external criteria like grade-point and objective "success" measures than is achievement for women in our culture. While these relationships tend to be low they are statistically significant and do point out empiracally what we all know, that the quality of the parent-child relationships manifest itself in later child behavior and attitudes.

In summary, I would like to re-emphasize the following points:

1. The current crop of undergradustes is, on the surface, making more of a break with their earlier environment than we have seen recently.

2. Universities are responding to this by becoming less parental in attitude, though not as fast as the students would like.

3. That the student who turns to a counselor tends to see the counselor in many of the same ways in which he saw his parents and that the counselor has to steer a fine course between the re-instituting the student's over-dependence upon his parents, and facilitating an abrupt and general rejection of the parents by the student.

4. That parent-counselor contact in the university setting often is not catalytic for the student's resolution of his dependency/independency difficulties.

5. That the student's often mis-perception of his parents is his reality and must be dealt with as such.

6. That there is a lack of research data in this area except suggestions that the quality of the parent-child relationship is manifested in the child's later behavior and attitudes.